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Death Squads Have Permeated Latin America

Operating at the subterranean level of Latin American politics is a far-flung network of death squads.

Their purpose is to intimidate suspected leftists and deter movements that threaten the status quo.

Their methods include kidnaping, assassination, secret pacts, intrigue, terrorism and blackmail.

But what is truly appalling is the possibility that the idea of an anti-communist "Murder Inc." germinated at the CIA.

Sources familiar with the secret history of the squads say that they were formed under agency sponsorship in 1954. This is denied by the CIA.

Whatever their origins, the death squads got out of control. Dedicated to the elimination of suspected leftists, they recruited assassins from the military, police and security agencies of right-wing governments.

Today the death squads are most active in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Dormant death squads exist in almost every other Latin American nation. In all these countries the squads are protected

by high-level military and government officials.

Their activities are loosely controlled and coordinated by an international organization known as La Mano Blanco (The White Hand).

"Our movements are all coordinated out of Mexico City," said a leader of the Honduran death squad. "The name of the front group there is CAL, Latin American Anti-Communist Confederation."

CAL is the Latin American affiliate of the World Anti-Communist League, a right-wing organization linked to ultra-conservative groups in Asia, Europe and the United States. A Mexican intelligence source said that CAL was founded by a neo-Nazi group after World War II. "CAL is also called The White Hand, The White Force and The White Brigade," the source said.

My associate Jon Lee Anderson arranged to meet with the Honduran death squad leader.

El Lobo, a pseudonym, said that he helped found the Honduran squad in 1979. It had 85 members. "Now we have 400," he said, "and we've successfully infiltrated the leftists with our own spies in the university and labor unions.

"We've eliminated 16 people so far. They were either labor unionists or university professors, all confirmed Marxists.

"First, we investigate and follow a suspect who has come to our atten-

tion," he said. "Then, if we decide the case merits further action, we either kidnap the victim or leave him an anonymous warning."

The usual warning, he said, is a scrap of paper with the message: "Men don't fight with flowers; they fight with bullets."

"If the suspect heeds our warning, and we confirm his rehabilitation, we leave him alone," El Lobo said. "If he doesn't, we machine-gun him."

One victim apparently never had a chance to change his ways. A peasant cooperative leader staying at a small hotel in Tegucigalpa disappeared the day after he arrived. Police found his body crammed into the trunk of his car. His head was riddled with bullets. The official explanation of the crime was "robbery."

El Lobo said that his group gets "unofficial help" from the Honduran military, whose head, Gen. Gustavo Alvarez, is the country's *de facto* ruler. Alvarez dismisses all reports of leftists' disappearances as "subversive propaganda."

But in 1982 Leonidas Torres Arias, former Honduran military intelligence chief, defected and implicated Alvarez in death-squad activity. Torres Arias reportedly is hiding in the Washington, D.C., area. He is said to be afraid to speak out for fear that he will be deported to Honduras and certain death.